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ABSTRACT

Data on the writing achievement of 11th-grade students in 1990 on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) may help answer the question of who is right: employers and educators who say students are poorly prepared in writing, or parents and students, who are more positive about the results of the writing preparation students receive in school. The data indicates that the employers and educators are right: 11th graders tended to produce minimally developed written work in terms of the tasks required on the NAEP. The 1990 assessment also found that students do not write much. Students may not have a realistic view of how well they write, and they do not have an accurate idea of what constitutes "good" writing. Students need better preparation in writing in high school to be successful in college and on the job. Schools need to: provide students with frequent writing assignments; give students a wide variety of assignments; provide students with examples of good writing and teach students how "good" writers approach writing. Parents should encourage their younger children to: write to pen pals; write letters and postcards to family members; keep a diary or journal; and write and illustrate stories they can share. (RS)

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Research Report

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Education

Research Report

What's Wrong With Writing and What Can We Do Right Now?

In 1991, a national poll of American educators and employers found widespread concern about students' preparation for further education and employment (Louis Harris and Associates). One particular concern was students' ability to write well, since both educators and employers value good writing skills.

When asked to rate the writing preparation of recent high school graduates

- Only 18 percent of educators and 12 percent of employers thought that high school graduates had learned to write well.

This low rating is all the more significant when compared to ratings in other areas. For example, 33 percent of educators and 30 percent of employers thought that high school graduates had learned to read well, and 27 percent of educators and 22 percent of employers thought that high school graduates had learned to do mathematics well.

Parents and students, on the other hand, were much more positive about the results of writing preparation in high school. In the same poll

- 66 percent of the students who took jobs and 56 percent of their parents thought the students were well prepared in writing for the job market; and
- 71 percent of the students who went on to higher education and 77 percent of their parents thought the students were well prepared in writing for higher education.

Who is right? Are high school students as poorly prepared in writing as employers and educators believe, or do parents and students have a clearer view of the picture? To help answer this question, we examined data on the writing achievement of eleventh grade students in 1990 on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

Students Don't Write Well

The NAEP report *Trends in Academic Progress* provides information on student achievement patterns across time in reading, math, science, and writing. The NAEP data for writing at grades 4, 8, and 11 tend to confirm the employers' and educators' view of the quality of high school preparation in writing.

According to the 1990 NAEP, which assessed students' writing ability using a series of performance tasks, eleventh-graders tended to produce minimally developed written work in terms of the tasks required. Students were given a variety of writing assignments—for example, a description of a summer job they would like and their qualifications for the job; a position paper on whether or not a bike lane should be installed in their locality, including a refutation of the opposite point of view; and a report based on notes they were given about a haunted house.

For the last task, students were asked to reorganize the information provided and to write an informative newspaper article about the house. Nearly half of the students wrote material rated unsatisfactory or minimal. The following is an example of a *minimal* response:

> "The house with no windows. This is a house with dead-end hallways, 36 rooms and stairs leading to the cieling [sic]. Doorways go nowhere and all this to confuse ghosts."

This is the complete, verbatim response—and nearly half of all eleventh grade students wrote similarly sketchy articles.

The other half of the students wrote reports rated *adequate* or better, of which the following is an example:

"Man builds strange house to scare ghosts. He says that he did it to confuse the ghosts. But why may we ask would he want to spend 10 years building a house. For instance there are stairs that go nowhere and hallways that go nowhere. This house has 36 rooms. If you ask me I think it is kind of strange."

While this piece of writing does present basic information, it is unlikely to meet acceptable standards of adequate writing for many jobs or college courses.

In contrast, the following is an example of an *elaborated* response, a step up from a rating of *adequate*:

"Years of rumors and unsubstantiated reports have created, in a quiet urban neighborhood, a house of horrors. The dwelling is one Appleby House, a modest dwelling of 36 rooms built over an 8 year period. On interviewing neighbors, who dubbed the owner "strange," one finds that 10 carpenters have been employed to build such oddities as stairways to ceilings, windows on blank walls, and doorways going nowhere. According to reports, these bizarre customizings are intended to confuse ghosts. Maybe the owner will report one day that he has caught one in a dead end hallway! Until then, however, the mystery of the building of Appleby House remains just that—a mystery."

Unfortunately only 2 percent of the eleventh grade students wrote material rated *elaborated* on this task, about the same percentage as on the other writing tasks. Furthermore, only 19 to 68 percent of students rated *adequate* or better on the other tasks (figure 1).

Students Don't Write Much

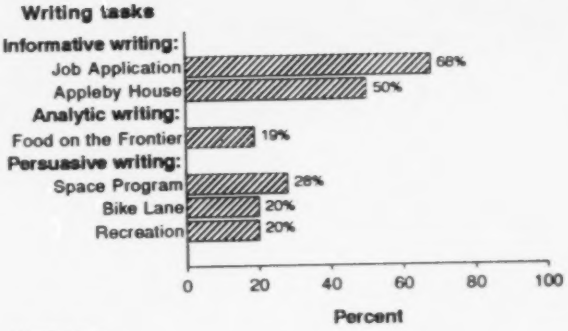
Because no survey can capture all of the factors related to students' performance in school, survey data should not be the basis for making definitive statements about the causes of low achievement. However, we do know from research that in order to learn to write well, students need frequent practice in writing a variety of materials. Also, NAEP does contain information on students' writing instruction as well as on their attitudes towards writing that may help us to better understand their achievement levels.

Unfortunately, a majority of high school students neither like to write nor do much writing in school or outside of school. The 1990 assessment of eleventh grade students found that

- Only 39 percent usually liked to write; and
- Only 28 percent wrote on their own outside of school.

What about writing in school? The 1988 NAEP assessment of twelfth grade students—students who were about to enter college or the work force—found that

Figure 1.—Percentage of eleventh grade students rated at or above the adequate level on each of six writing tasks



NAEP 1990

Description of Writing Tasks

Job Application: Students were asked to provide a brief description of a desirable summer job and to summarize their previous experiences or qualifications for it.

Appleby House: Students were asked to write a newspaper article about an unusual haunted house based on notes they were given.

Food on the Frontier: Students were required to read a social studies passage about frontier life and then to explain how modern-day food differs from frontier food.

Space Program: Students were required to adopt a point of view about whether or not funding for the space program should be reduced, and to write a letter to their senators explaining their position.

Bike Lane: Students were instructed to take a stand on whether or not a bike lane should be installed in their community, and to refute the opposing view.

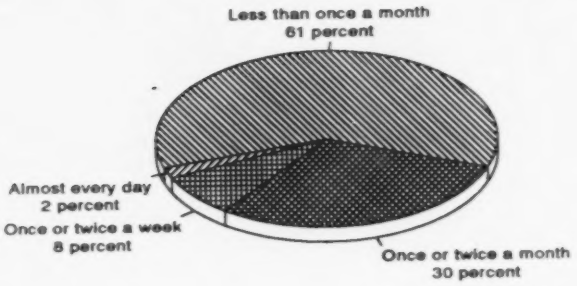
Recreation Opportunities: Students were asked to take a position on their town's purchase of a railroad track or a warehouse as a recreation center, to defend their position, and to refute the alternative position.

- Only 8 percent reported that they were assigned to write a paper that was three or more pages long every week in English class; and
- 61 percent said they wrote papers this long less than once a month (figure 2).

These students did not write much in their other classes either:

- 75 percent said they never received writing assignments in their social studies or history classes.

Figure 2.—Twelfth grade students' report of how often they wrote a paper of three or more pages for English class



NAEP 1988

When asked how many reports or papers they had written during the last 6 weeks as part of any school assignment, 11 percent said none and 38 percent said only one or two. While students may not receive long assignments because teachers do not have time to grade them, it is unlikely that students will improve their writing skills without frequent practice in writing. In fact, NAEP found a correlation between the number of writing assignments students completed and their performance on the NAEP writing measures (figure 3).

While this result suggests that those who write more improve their writing, it is also quite possible that the better writers are given more writing assignments, and that this accounts for the observed score differences. However, given the importance of writing for further education and employment success, it seems clear that all students could benefit from more writing assignments.

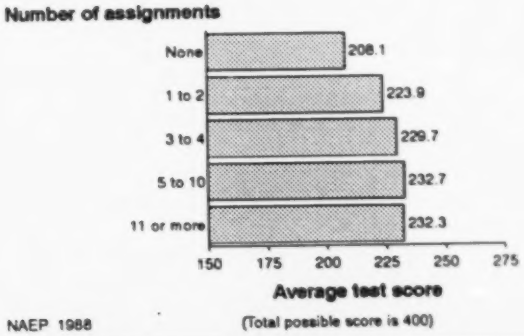
Why Do So Many Students Think They Write Well?

The Harris poll, as noted earlier, showed that the majority of students (66 and 71 percent, respectively) believed that their high school writing instruction prepared them well for jobs and higher education. The NAEP findings were somewhat less positive. A majority of the students recognized that they did not write well: only 44 percent agreed with the statement "I am a good writer."

The differences between the Harris poll and the NAEP findings may be due to the wording of the questions: students may think they are prepared well enough for a job without necessarily thinking they are good writers. However, both studies indicate that students may not have a realistic view of how well they write, and that they do not have an accurate idea of what constitutes good writing, especially as judged by employers, post-secondary educators, and NAEP standards.

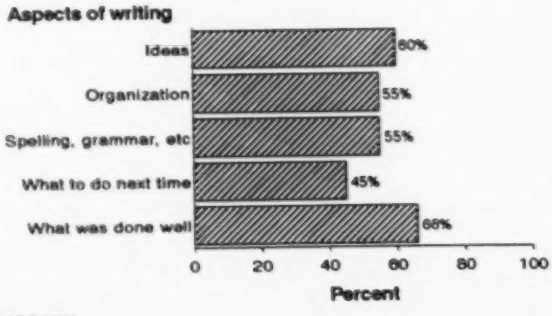
Many students may think they write well based on feedback from teachers. For example, the 1990 NAEP found that a third of eighth grade teachers reported giving their students mostly A's or about half A's and B's on their writing assignments. (This information was not available for older students in 1990.) Furthermore, students may not receive enough information about how to improve their writing. The 1988 NAEP found that while 66 percent of twelfth grade students reported that their teachers usually commented on what they did well in a paper, and 60 percent commented on the ideas, only 45 percent commented on what they should do next time to improve their writing (figure 4) .

Figure 3.—Twelfth grade students' test scores, by the number of reports or papers they said they wrote during the last 6 weeks as part of any school assignment



NAEP 1988

Figure 4.—Percentage of twelfth grade students who reported that their teachers commented on each aspect of their writing more than half the time



NAEP 1988

What Can Be Done?

Students need better preparation in writing in high school to be successful in college and on the job.

Schools need to

- Provide students with frequent writing assignments;
- Give students a wide variety of writing assignments: stories, reports, letters, poems, journals;
- Provide students with examples of good writing;
- Teach students how good writers approach writing: how they organize their thoughts, brainstorm, revise, and work with others to improve their work;
- Provide students with constructive and honest feedback on their writing, including suggestions for how to improve future writing assignments; and
- Hold students to high standards.

Parents can help their children become better writers by encouraging good writing skills early. Younger children should be encouraged to

- Write to pen pals;
- Write letters and postcards to family members;
- Keep a diary or journal;
- Help write a family newsletter to send to relatives;
- Compose poems, or rewrite favorite poems to tell their own story;
- Write and illustrate stories they can share; and
- Write their own lyrics to favorite tunes.

Parents should ensure that their older children receive frequent writing assignments in all their classes—not just in English class—, that they are held accountable for completing them, and that teachers give constructive feedback to help them improve their writing skills.

This *Research Report* is part of a series published by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement for teachers and parents. If you would like to suggest topics for future *Research Reports*, please write to: Office of Research, U.S. Department of Education, 555 New Jersey Avenue NW, Room 610e, Washington, DC, 20208–5648. To be added to the *Research Report* mailing list, send your name and address to OERI *Research Report*, Outreach Office at the address above. This report is a public document and may be reproduced in part or in its entirety without permission. Please credit OERI.

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Notes: (1) The Harris study was based on a sample of 402 employers, 301 educators in trade and vocational schools, 2-year colleges, small 4-year colleges, and large 4-year universities, and 1,744 members of the public. (2) The 1990 NAEP assessment of writing performance included approximately 30,000 students in grades 4, 8, and 11. The 1988 assessment included approximately 20,000 students in grades 4, 8, and 12. (3) Information on effective writing programs is available from the National Diffusion Network, 555 New Jersey Avenue NW, Room 510e, Washington, DC 20208-5648.

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